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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the general situation of reading instruction at the secondary level. The paper is divided into three sections: "Two Decades of Reading 'Programs,'" which discusses the increasing numbers of retarded readers, the claims of reading materials, and the characteristics of some of the existing reading programs; "Teacher Education and Secondary Reading," which discusses the problems that confront secondary reading instruction, the re-orientation and re-education of in-service teachers, and competency-based reading programs; and "The Learning Common, a Cooperative Approach," which discusses a Center for Reading Improvement/Students Instructing Students (CRISIS), which includes among its activities course sessions of two undergraduate courses, in-service participation, and a cooperative effort among various disciplines. (WR)

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AND THOSE WHO CAN'T, TEACH -- READING!

A Task Ahead in Teacher Education

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In the current focus on (one might say almost frenzy about) competency-based reading programs, the emphasis seems to be on this approach as a new panacea for instructional ills. Actually, the great revolution implicit in competency systems is that finally we may be moving away from simplistic quantification of reading achievement into a more valid qualification. In short, we are embarking on the establishment of a new value system both for teachers and for students and it may be advisable to proceed with more deliberate speed in order to build well and to forestall cataclysms.

Since logical propositions frequently appear marvelously simple, we are now rushing into print new "systems" which may possibly be implemented in elementary schools with minimal disruption of procedures. In grades one through six where every teacher is literally a teacher of reading, there is general understanding of the complexities of the reading act and of the basic techniques for developing reading abilities. The existing situation on the secondary levels is generally in dismaying contrast.

The old saw holds that those who can, do and those who can't, teach. While most of us in the profession reject that canard categorically, we are forced to admit that it

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may be disturbingly apt when applied to the teaching of reading in secondary schools.

Two Decades of Reading "Programs"

The schools of New York may not be truly representative of those throughout the nation but they most certainly do reflect the problems of most major city systems. Therefore a review of the situation in this metropolitan area will be typical of conditions in thousands of secondary schools elsewhere.

About fifteen years ago when reading achievement scores in our secondary schools revealed a disturbing downward trend, great numbers of remedial reading programs were established in our junior high schools. (The senior highs for the most part seemed either unwilling to acknowledge the existence of a reading problem or most willing to blame the lower schools while taking little action themselves.) So we had many poor readers at the intermediate levels who were ministered to by remedial reading specialists and by elementary teachers hastily recruited. It is very difficult to find specific data about the results achieved, but it became abundantly clear that the ranks of retarded readers were growing and were not being matched by a sufficient number of specialists to instruct them. As the years passed remedial programs became corrective programs with larger groups of pupils being taught by newly produced reading teachers. Whatever the results of this era, we have now reached the point where we have legions of inefficient readers and only a palace guard of reading

specialists and reading teachers to provide for them. So we have devised what are triumphantly called individualized reading programs which are overseen by a coterie of teachers and aides recruited very often by a process reminiscent of impressment. That is to say that although many of these colleagues are volunteers disturbingly large numbers are reading instructors more by administrative fiat than by training or aptitude.

The current situation results in almost total dependence upon reading instructional "hardware" and upon commercial kits, packets, booklets and sheets which are purchased like patent medicines because their names indicate that they are specifics for the cure of reading ills. The metaphor is even more apt when we see the almost pathetically unquestioning acceptance of claims and labels.

There are, of course, many benefits. Perceptive teachers and aides learn from the materials, by doing. And this is fine when the materials provide good instructional models. But it takes experience to detect the flaws in many commercial packages and until the instructors gain in astuteness much misinformation is transmitted to the students, never to be corrected. Despite such inadequacies, students gain from the concrete reading tasks and the visible accomplishment of their skills exercises. They also gain in confidence from the supportive one-to-one relationships with their tutors. In some cases, the gains in reading achievement scores are reported to be dramatic.

However, the outcomes of the program are often less than its designers hope and less than its clients need. In many

instances, the evaluation of reading instruction is based solely on measurement by norm-referenced tests. Teaching for transfer of reading skills to other reading situations in school and in life is minimal. Content area teachers are generally uninformed about the scope and objectives of the individualized program and therefore they can make no provision for instructional reinforcement of reading gains in the regular classroom. In the newly popular elective course structures in secondary schools, heterogeneous classes are still found ostensibly "reading" one uniform text or selection. Under such circumstances, it is small wonder indeed that students still don't like to read and refuse to do their home assignments. The best organized reading improvement programs, given these conditions, can only succeed in raising scores and hopes which will all too often be destroyed outside the reading room.

Teacher Education and Secondary Reading

The instructional crisis with which we are faced today is largely the result of professional sins of omission. To date, many states still do not require for secondary certification any preparation whatsoever in the techniques of reading improvement. At long last, New York City mandates six credits in reading methodology for the junior high school license in English. No such criterion exists for teacher candidates in other disciplines or in the high schools.

However, faced with limited prospects for hiring new teachers in the next few years, even the most enlightened

and comprehensive programs of pre-service training will have only a minute impact on the improvement of the present instructional situation in reading. The major focus must perforce be on in-service teacher education.

The problems which confront us in this enterprise are classic. Most secondary teachers consider themselves subject area specialists, not reading teachers. Many are threatened by the very concept of improving learning in their content areas through reading instruction. Those of us who have long been proponents of the total school reading program must place a portion of the blame for this situation on clinically oriented colleagues. In allowing low achieving readers to be put into isolation wards with remedial specialists who have in some instances been reluctant to share their expertise with classroom teachers we have fostered the idea that inadequate reading achievement is an illness that is only treatable by specialists and that cases of retardation should be put into a kind of academic quarantine until cured. We have also permitted the idea to persist that students who read on grade level or above have no need for reading improvement instruction.

The only immediate hope for establishing developmental programs for reading improvement for all students in all subjects lies in the re-orientation and re-education of in-service teachers. Contrary to scornful opinion, many so-called clinical professors of education do exist who are able and ready to engage in work with the schools. The real impediments to such endeavor are budgetary and motivational. Current disappearance of federal funds

coupled with sharply reduced school and college budgets makes the financial picture a dismal one. And school faculties, working long and arduous days, are scarcely eager to attend afterschool workshops and courses.

Faced with an apparent impasse, state departments of education are emphasizing competency-based reading programs probably in the hope that the establishment of specific ends will impel teachers to develop means. The crucial questions are for whom and by whom the competency modules will be developed. If the objectives are established by reading specialists for the students, they will be imposed on unprepared and unmotivated school staffs who will probably send them in due time to where the detailed and meticulously prepared reading curriculum bulletins of the last two decades now repose. If the performance criteria are designed by administrators and by teacher education agencies for the prospective teachers they will have impact on future pedagogues but little effect on practicing instructors. Almost every experienced reading supervisor is alert to the ineffectuality of imposed instructional goals.

The Learnings Common, a Cooperative Approach

Although the process is notably slow, it is suggested here that cooperative evolution of competency statements promises to be more productive than arbitrary imposition.

Queens College shares a large parcel of urban ground with Klapper Elementary School, Campbell Junior High

School and Bowne High School. The four entities are embarking on a long-range professional alliance dedicated to the common improvement of teaching and learning K-16, known as the Learnings Common. As one aspect of this enterprise, the junior high school will house the first unit of a reading improvement center, Project CRISIS (Center for Reading Improvement/Students Instructing Students). It is projected that similar units will evolve in the high school and in the elementary school in the future.

The physical embodiment of the first phase will be a "non-classroom", a unit especially furnished and supplied with materials for reading in every subject. Two undergraduate courses in reading instruction will be taught here and teacher education students will spend additional laboratory time (student service hours) both in the Center and in regular classrooms working with individual pupils, with small groups and with whole classes. Course sessions will be open to the school staff who will also supervise the laboratory activities of the college students. The various department are currently meeting with the college coordinator to plan the resource center, to identify their own professional needs and to establish organizational patterns which will assure mutual benefits from the student service component. As specific objectives for each department emerge, there will be cooperative selection of instructional materials for the Center.

It is encouraging to see that the teachers have already asked for resources outlining basic reading skills so that they may become informed in their initial decision making.

A member of the Music Department has offered to share his own original ideas for reading improvement in choral music. Mathematics instructors plan to work with the college students to devise new materials for teaching analysis of verbal problems. Professors of art education at the college are eager to work with their fellows at the junior high to develop special approaches to reading through creative art experiences. Teacher educators in home economics are enthusiastic about enrolling their students in the Center to work on the development of functional reading skills in those areas. In short, even at this early stage, participants are responding affirmatively to cooperative effort in professional problem solving. As the project materializes fully, pre-service teachers, in-service teachers and teacher educators will be engaged in a tri-partite effort to develop a total school reading environment to benefit every pupil. As the partnership prospers, all parties will grow in professional competence in reading instruction through their participation and work with college students.

As the in-service teachers analyze and refine their assessment of specific reading needs in the school, emphasis will be placed on the formulation of objectives, the methods for achieving them and the means of evaluating their achievement. It is expected that two sets of competency statements will emerge, one for secondary school students and one for pre-service and in-service teachers. Such objectives, cooperatively evolved, can be continually re-evaluated and revised in terms of their ongoing daily application in the actual school setting and of the func-

tional needs of the persons for whom they were designed.

Such cooperative effort will most probably require the full five years for program development outlined by the state education department. The structure will evolve slowly indeed, but it will be designed to permit renovation, it will meet user specifications and it will be built to last.